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Memorandum 11 Aug 75

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No Foreign Dissem

11 August 1975

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Prospects for Azorean Independence*

Principal Judgments

The continued domination of Portugal by pro-Communist and radical leftist factions is likely to trigger a move for independence in the Azores in the next few months.

For a variety of reasons, the present Portuguese leadership would experience great difficulty in mobilizing the necessary forces to put down such a rebellion.

With good timing and organization, a revolt having the support of a majority of the island's military commanders and soldiers would probably succeed.

Should non-radicals come to power in Lisbon, however, and take steps to grant additional autonomy and ameliorate the island's economic grievances, sentiment for complete separation from the mainland would decline.

An Azorean revolt at this time could jeopardize present efforts by the anti-Communist forces to return Portugal to a more democratic course, particularly if the pro-Communist and radical leftists could plausibly connect such a move with reactionary groups like that of former President Spínola.

* This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, CIA, under the auspices of the NIO for Western Europe. It has been discussed within the Intelligence Community but has not been formally coordinated.

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1. Sentiment for independence in the Azores is rooted in the islanders' desire for more of a voice in their own affairs and in the long history of discriminatory economic practices by mainland Portugal. The recent impetus for independence and the formal organization of the Front for the Liberation of the Azores (FLA), however, have largely resulted from Azorean fears of a Communist takeover in Lisbon. Continued domination by the radical leftist and Communist-backed Goncalves factions is likely to drive the separatists to an independence declaration. A reversal of this domination, which placed non-radical elements in power, promised good prospects for solving the Azoreans' economic grievances and provided them with an acceptable form of self-government would go a long way in disarming the separatists and defusing the present situation.

2. We have no evidence at present that planning by the Azorean Liberation Front (FLA) for an armed revolt and a unilateral declaration of independence has reached an advanced stage. The FLA's main difficulty is organizational problems. It has at least the acquiescence of some sectors of all socio-economic classes, but its leadership is predominantly drawn from a small, economically privileged minority. Membership probably numbers at most a few hundred out of a population of some 300,000 in the Azores. It is possible that some of the nine islands that make up the Azores would disassociate themselves from a declaration of independence, but the larger and more important islands in the group probably would remain united on the issue. In June, 36 prominent Azoreans were imprisoned for their role in a farmers' demonstration which resulted in the removal of the Portuguese civil governor of the two islands of Sao Miguel and Santa Maria. The FLA leaders were released after several weeks, but the arrests shocked and angered the local community.

3. Portugal's leftist leaders reacted to the June events in Sao Miguel in a manner calculated to defuse the situation as rapidly as possible. They acknowledged the legitimacy of Azorean economic complaints and promised prompt action to remedy long-standing inequities between the islands and the mainland. But they also issued a stern warning to the separatist leaders, and, although they were all eventually released from detention, Lisbon's behavior in that episode suggests that the present leaders would try to squelch a bid for independence by the island group.

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25X6 4. FLA representatives have tried to obtain arms and assistance from abroad, but as far as we know with only limited success. The French government has apparently refused to become involved and ambassadors of the EC countries in Washington have voted unanimously not to receive FLA emissaries. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] We do not know whether they have given the Azoreans anything of substance. The FLA has also sought support from the Azorean immigrant community in the US and from US officials.

5. In order for a rebellion to achieve even an initial, limited success, the FLA would need the support of key Portuguese officers, sergeants and enlisted men in the Azores. Two officers upon whom they pin their hopes are the military governor of the Azores, General Magalhaes, and 18th Battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Miranda. Both officers share the separatists' concern over communist influence in Portugal and are sympathetic to the Azoreans' demands for increased autonomy and more equal economic treatment. Yet, apparently neither one has decided to support an armed revolt, and they would probably defy Lisbon with arms only if they are convinced that pro-Communist forces have come to power to stay in Portugal. Magalhaes recently went to Lisbon to petition for more autonomy as a step to satisfy the Azoreans short of independence. He has selected a five-man junta to develop a governmental organization for the Azores. His selections are anti-Communist, however, and are not likely to be accepted by the present regime.

6. General Magalhaes believes that the two key infantry battalions on the islands (the 17th on Terceira and the 18th on Sao Miguel) would not impede an independence move, but would assist the populace in armed resistance. The battalions are well-armed, well-trained, well-disciplined and well-led. All soldiers and nearly all officers are Azorean. The officers have had considerable combat experience. Some smaller air force and naval units might remain loyal to the mainland and would have to be neutralized in any coup attempt, but General Magalhaes believes this could easily be accomplished.

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7. FLA military preparations appear to be moving very slowly, presumably because of a lack of success in obtaining weapons from abroad. The separatists themselves have been armed only with several hundred shotguns, though they may have recently received a number of Belgian-made arms. (We do not yet know the source or amount. [REDACTED])

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[REDACTED] we have no evidence that contingency plans have been made to contend with a landing or a paratroop drop by Portuguese troops.

8. Inadequate preparations, however, do not necessarily rule out an uprising at some point in the next few months. Separatist leaders reportedly are convinced that Portugal has written off the Azores and that mainland troops could do nothing about a revolt. While this attitude may reflect wishful thinking rather than political realities in Lisbon, it is also possible -- even likely -- that the present Portuguese regime itself has not firmly decided on contingency plans and that a revolt would give rise to divided counsels in Lisbon about how to cope with it. There might be a period of floundering before any action was decided on.

9. Moreover, there is some question about Lisbon's ability to respond effectively to an uprising on the islands should one occur. The state of dissension in the armed forces raises doubts about whether an adequate expeditionary force could be assembled. It is possible that Portuguese troops would refuse to go to the Azores, as some reportedly did on June 6. If the separatists had control of the harbors and airfields, it would be difficult and perhaps impossible for Lisbon to land an expeditionary force. A paratroop drop would be extremely difficult given the limited Portuguese capabilities and would depend upon weather and terrain. The Portuguese have a very limited capability for an opposed amphibious landing.

10. In addition to the formidable logistics problems involved, other factors make a resolute Portuguese response less certain than some months ago. The

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power struggle among Lisbon's ruling military is presently preoccupying Portuguese leaders. It is indeed uncertain whether the security forces can cope with the increasing manifestations of hostility even at home.

11. Most of Portugal's leaders, regardless of their politics, continue to view the Azores as an integral part of the mainland. Because of the US strategic interest, Portugal sees the islands as an important bargaining chip in its relations with Washington and a principal source of leverage with the West. The most recent authoritative statement of the policy of the present regime was made by the labor minister, who said Portugal would do everything in its power to defeat an independence move. In sum, we judge that Lisbon still wants and intends to hold onto the Azores, but probably has not faced up to the difficulties of doing so in certain contingencies. It has no answer to the problem, and its response would be determined in light of circumstances and capabilities at the time of the uprising.

12. On the one hand, the Portuguese leaders, now badly divided over other issues, might be galvanized into decisive action. If the separatists failed to secure the major airfields and port facilities, the odds are still that Lisbon could suppress a separatist move, though there might be difficulties in doing so quickly. (Radicals in the AFM would almost certainly see such an action as a first step in an attempt to overthrow the Portuguese regime itself -- especially if members of the old regime or followers of General Spínola were associated with it.*) On the other hand, a well-timed and well-organized revolt which had the support of local military commanders, which secured the ports and airfields, and which coincided with turmoil on the mainland would probably succeed.

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* According to the [REDACTED]
25X1X6 [REDACTED] who have been interviewed have expressed strong resistance to the Azores being used as a base for counter-revolution on the mainland.

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13. Leaders of the Portuguese Socialist Party believe that an independence move in the Azores at this time could jeopardize present efforts by the anti-Communist forces to return Portugal to a more democratic course. This is particularly true if the pro-Communists and radical leftists could plausibly connect such a move with reactionary groups like that of former President Spinoia.

14. In general, the more the Portuguese government moves leftward and the more it is embroiled in distractions at home and in Angola, the greater the likelihood of a separatist attempt in the Azores. The recent formation of the fifth provisional government in Portugal -- which is dominated by pro-Communist and leftist nationalist officers -- adds to the likelihood. The appointment of radical leftists or communist sympathizers to the Azores governing body could trigger the revolt.

15. An independent Azores would seek diplomatic recognition promptly in order to legitimize itself before Portugal had a chance to move against it. The attitudes of European countries would largely depend upon their perception of events in Portugal itself. So far, they have shown a desire to stay aloof, since they still have hopes that moderates will prevail in Portugal. But if Portugal should come to represent a clear threat to Europe and NATO, the chances for European diplomatic recognition of an independent Azores would be enhanced.

16. Whatever the circumstances in Portugal, and whether the movement succeeded or failed, the US would come in for some charges of complicity by European countries and the third world. If Portugal continues to remain under the control of the radical leftist and pro-Communist factions, the impact of these charges will be reduced -- at least in Europe. In this eventuality, however, charges against the US will be accentuated within Portugal itself -- where the Communists would use them to enhance their own standing and attack the US and NATO.

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